

Why Your Scenarios Come Back

Richard A. Rowland,
First National Pictures

Illustrations by
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Even accusing the studio people of the theft of their ideas

The salesgirl sends me a scenario of society life; a bookkeeper tries to sell me a tale of adventure in foreign lands

SOMEONE has said that the United States is a nation of story writers. I won't go quite so far as to affirm that, but I do believe that of all the people you meet, one out of three has either tried to write for the movies* or has contemplated doing so. And that, for the whole of the country, makes a vast total, writes Richard A. Rowland, First National Pictures, in the New York Tribune.

The interesting thing about it all is that what all these thousands of individuals are trying to do is not to pour water into the ocean, but to meet a need that really does exist. There is, unquestionably, a dearth of suitable material for screen use. The professional writers cannot keep pace with the demand, nor can they go on writing forever. And so, now, some of them have turned to other fields, and are sought up for the screen when seen in publication form. Magazine stories are considered too tame for feature they appear in print. It is well that such, at best sight, unlikely material as "Wives and the Children of History" is to be used for the screen, and it is even somewhat reassuring to suppose that either the telephone

is in line for picturization. Certainly it is that the first basic need of every motion picture producer is good stories. Without that it is hardly to go ahead. Stories dealing with dramatic situations and human appeal are what the movie producers are looking for, high, low and in-between.

The situation is unique. On the one hand is the number of people eager to try to write for the screen, and on the other hand scores of studios falling over each other to their subjects for good material. Yet for the amateur writer who succeeds, a thousand fall. What is the trouble? What is the remedy?

Of the multitude of people aiming to achieve story success a big percentage face the desire, but lack the proper mental equipment to further it. Still, there must be thousands of others who have that equipment—imagination, education and leisure, and some others of the necessary qualifications. Of these, some are easily discouraged by the difficulties of the task and so fail; the way while others persevere and get paid to sell their scripts.

This failure, may be due to one of two main causes. Either behind that person stands the lack of sufficient talent, or persistence is not accompanied by such adaptability to art as would enable the author across the line which divides the amateur from the skilled writer. For often all one producer points out what would surprise why the raw amateur should succeed as an amateur. Except for an occasional instance of native genius, it is only after the amateur has practiced and practiced and actually progressed beyond the amateur stage that success can come, which is one of practically all times of emergence and maturity of screen writing. Rupert Hughes, highly successful author and now prominent screen writer, is reported to have collected 200 rejection slips before he succeeded in selling a story to an editor. Had he been possessed of less perseverance the world might never have had "The Wizard of Oz."

Except in an occasional case, the days when moments of leisure could bring quick success are gone by. Scenario writing is a business requiring as much attention as any other business if you are to achieve success. But do not let that frighten me. If you cannot sell stories straight out in wholesale time, that does not mean your cause is lost at that time. But don't expect to sell until practice and study have finally equipped you to cross the amateur line.

One great shortcoming, as I see it, in amateur writers for the screen is a general tendency to overlook the necessity for constant action of a plot, not of symbolic nature. They send their characters on long journeys while they describe minute details of preparation and incidents en route which do nothing to further the movement or help build toward the climax. The result of such material in picture form would be extremely drags and uninteresting.

Frequently, again, they have but a single situation, but seize upon it to build what is intended to form five or six reels of picture material. That situation is perhaps unusual, or it may at least possess some slight element of novelty. But that is not enough.

In the great majority of scripts by amateurs the characters are overdrawn and consequently are grotesque or inconsistent with the typically human instincts and with the things that motivate and actuate the average person. In other words, they full of being lifelike, and so full of conviction



Maybe your trouble has been that you have tried to sell comedies

Jerry Bates Frost, who is rising from a long and highly successful stage career to motion pictures, has this advice for screenwriters:

"The main trouble with amateurs is that they persist in trying to write about things they do not know. The sales girl sends me a scenario of 'society life,' a bookkeeper tries to sell me a tale of adventure in foreign lands. And so it goes. We seek for romance even in our writings. We suppose any field is there, but we cannot bring it to others in this fashion. To be interesting one must be authentic, and we cannot be that unless we really know the life of which we write. But there is a trend both on stage and screen for intimate stories, and there is the field for the amateur scenario writer of average experience."

Another great fault with would-be writers is that their imagination is extensive rather than intensive, with the result that the action is scattered from pole to pole or even to a locality as unfamiliar as Mars. Many an amateur's story would take 20 years to picturize.

Richard Barthelmess finds that in his experience nine out of every twelve stories he reads are wholly lacking in one real idea, one original theme. It is said that there is nothing new under the sun, therefore the greater is the necessity to give some fresh twist to an old theme. Without that one story is pretty sure to be returned with the scenario editor's regrets." Mr. Barthelmess declares that so much space is taken up with unnecessary and wasteful side issues, not to say digressions, that in most cases any real "meat" in a story might have to be buried under useless circumstances and scenes of juxtaposition to the central story that no editor will write through it, and your manuscript "comes back."

"I do not believe," says this star, "that any amateur story requires more than 10,000 words to set it forth and tell its plot. Leave the working out to the continuity man and the director. The idea is what counts."

I have heard writers complain that after their story has come back they have recognized in a later picture just the sort of action or scene they originally submitted, and these writers have been angry to the point of suggesting, nay, even of accusing the studio people of the theft of their ideas. As a matter of fact, the explanation is that what the author imagined original with himself or herself was nothing of the kind. Unconsciously and unwittingly, it may be, there has remained in their minds the unrecognized memory of some scene they have seen in a since forgotten picture and unconsciously it is reproduced in the scenario. Thus the plagiarism attributed to the studio lay rather with the would-be author. "Plagiarism, unconscious or otherwise, sticks out all over them," says Colonel J. E. Brady, editor of Metro Pictures corporation, who declares that the number of good stories does not begin to meet the demand for them. "The trouble is that 90 per cent of the scripts received haven't a grain of originality in them."

Joseph M. Schenck is another producer of note

who tells the same tale of shortage of acceptable material. Of late he has gone mostly to the big studios for material for Norma Talmadge.

Let us be appalled by the seeming hopelessness of your woes right here let me cheer you up somewhat. If, as the so-called scenario textbooks tend to make you suppose, you had to turn out the finished product to get your story accepted, you might well feel ready to quit. But the opposite is the case. In fact, the amateur need not, and should not, even arm himself with anything beyond a real story, a script and directly told. You need not and should not worry about entrances, exits, red-hots and other technicalities. Leave that to the scenario man, or woman whose business it is to put the imagined story into practical screen form. The amateur is not expected to write "good stories"—that is, to separate and apart and in the true sense of the word make that

common pine lumber is used as the

GOOD CALF STANCHION EASILY MADE



Calf Stanchion Designed by the Dairy Division of the Department of Agriculture.

Farmers and dairymen are well acquainted with the disposition of young calves to upset pails of feed, and when several young members of the bovine family eat together their respective appetites are not easily regulated where the self-help or cafeteria plan of feeding prevails. Manufacturers of mechanical devices have capitalized this condition and there are on the market steel stanchions for keeping calves at mealtimes. These appliances, however, entail an expenditure of money which the farmer may object to in the event that makeshift arrangements are to be found.

May Be Built Cheaply.

K. E. Parks, dairy engineer of the dairy division, United States Department of Agriculture, has designed a calf stanchion that may be built by the farmer or dairymen at a cost of approximately \$2. This homemade unit is in use at the experimental dairy farm at Beltsville, Md. The stanchion can be built singly or arranged in series so as to accommodate as many young animals as are maintained in the particular farm employing this convenient device.

Common pine lumber is used as the

construction material, the unit at the government farm requiring about twenty board feet of lumber. A space of two feet is allowed for each stanchion where the arrangement is in series. When young calves are thus temporarily imprisoned, the feed tank is immune from the licking tendencies of the future dairy cow and a group of these members of the bovine family may take turns together without there being an evidence of greediness of any sort to the displeasure of another. Calves from the time they are given access to the feed pail until three months of age may be reared in these stanchions when partaking of their meals. After the elapse of 90 days of their life, they can be placed in pens.

Blueprints of these stanchions may be had by addressing requests to the dairy division, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington. Already, in testimony to the remarkable cheapness and value of these homemade stanchions, there are hundreds of them in service faithfully duplicating the structural outline of the dairy engineer of this federal department.

CUT-OVER WOODLOT FAVORED

DOES NOT CAUSE SOUR SOILS

Value Increased in After Years by Taking Out Detractive and Undesirable Trees.

The owner of a farm woodlot who is looking to the future as well as to the present will prefer what is known as "an improvement cutting" to a less systematic harvesting of his timber crop, forestry specialists declare. They say that it will pay the farmer to leave standing a considerable percentage of those kinds of trees which he wants to encourage in his woodland.

Contrary to popular belief, the use of acid phosphate will not produce acidity in the soils, according to a statement made by the workers in the field of agronomy at the New York state college of agriculture at Ithaca.

The college long has advocated a greater use of acid phosphate with or without manure for fertilizing soils.

Some farmers, however, have feared an increase of weeds and grass.

Common pine lumber is used as the

up the gaps left by the cutting.

All logging operations should be made with the preservation and extension of the stand of young growth in mind.

It is considered a good practice at the first cutting to remove trees like the chestnut, aspen, ironwood and beech, since they are considered less desirable and satisfactory in New York woodlots.

Staghorned, batth-injured and heavy-folaged, bluish trees of every variety may likewise be disposed of at the first cutting.

Many of the scenes have been made meaningful as motion pictures." (I quote the critic of a leading New York newspaper on a recent film.) "For instance, there is one in which Henry Garnett, knowing that he must die, sits listening to an inexorable clock. It ticks and ticks, counting off the seconds of his life. Finally, in futile desperation, he seizes the pendulum and stops it, but as he holds the metal bar, a phantom pendulum behind it swings on. Here is cinematography. Here is complete expressiveness within a picture!"

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There it is in a nutshell. A real idea, logically and simply worked out without needless discussion, directly and clearly, to an inevitable conclusion. Therein lies one way where your story won't come back.

Hope Hampton, whose latest starring vehicle is "Light in the Dark," tells me that the reason so many scenario writers fail is because they cannot or do not put themselves in the place of the audience. In other words, they cannot properly visualize their work.

"It should always be borne in mind," says this star, "that thought and impression can be effected only by action. Perhaps the ideal film would be one in which there were no subtitles at all. I do not know whether that could be, but the next best thing is where the action is so clear, so convincing, and the conclusion so inevitable that only a minimum number of subtitles is necessary."

After all, you can't blame the producer, even though he may err in sending your story back. It's different with, say, a magazine editor, and even he sends stuff back—lots of it. The magazine editor may, with not very disastrous results, use a mediocre or even a poor story, provided he makes sure his magazine contains at the same time two or three good tales. The strong stories will carry the week. But with the photoplay producer it is very different. All his eggs, so to speak, are in one basket. In accepting a story, or rather in making a picture from it, he risks the possibility of losing something like \$100,000. It makes him more than careful of his choice.

You can, however, be practically sure of one thing. If your story has real and full screen merit and you keep it going visiting long enough it will stop coming back at last. In its place will come a check. More writers than one, by sticking eternally at it and refusing to quit, have ultimately sold their product, for it is the very act of writing and rewriting that ultimately makes a professional out of an amateur.

GIVE MACHINERY GOOD CARE

When Exposed to Open Weather It Detritates Quickly—Prevent Action of Rust.

In 15 years an Oregon farmer paid out \$2,500 in bounties on pocket gophers, at 25 cents apiece to set 750 acres of land cleared of those pests. His private opinion was that the bounty men always left a few animals so that they could come back again. A demonstrator of the biological survey of the United States Department of Agriculture visited this man's farm and showed him how to use poison. The cost of the first application was \$1.50 for poison and \$21 for labor for seven days' time. A second application is yet to be made to complete eradication, but after the first application only one fresh gopher mound could be found.

POISON FOR POCKET GOPHERS

Most Excellent Plan for Eradication of Pests as Bounty Men Leave Few Animals.

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LIME REQUIRED IN GARDENS

Scatter Shovelful or Two of Material Into Compact Heap—Easy Way of Applying.

As the grass, lawn clippings, vegetable leaf and stalks are raked up and thinned, rules to be composted during the winter, scatter in a shovelful or two of lime. Lime is often needed in gardens more than fertilizer materials; and this is one of the easiest ways of applying it. Ground limestone may be bought at a low price at building material yards.

BURN RUBBISH FROM GARDEN

Excellent Plan to Destroy Injurious Insects and Prevent Many Plant Diseases.

Many plant diseases and injuries

insects live over winter in the dead stalks of garden vegetables and other refuse left after the cropping season is over. The best plan is to rake all this material together, and when dry set fire to it. While some organic matter will be destroyed, much trouble

for next year will be obviated.